

やはり俺の
青春ラブコメは
まちがっている。

My youth romantic comedy is
wrong as I expected.

渡 航【wataru watari】

illustration ぽんかん⑧

12
twelve



渡 航

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12

twelve

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総武高校プロ☆
コンシューマー映像撮影

比企谷八幡
hachiman hikigaya

由比ヶ浜結衣
yui yuigahama



雪ノ下陽乃
haruno yukinoshita

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

Interlude

There was a long silence.

The words that followed were so quick that they lacked emotion, while at the same time, they were also devoid of logic.

Saying meaningless words was the same as saying nothing at all. Hence, I guess it isn't wrong to call it silence.

The cloudy skyline that was dyed red from the evening sun turned to a shade of deep blue, and the occasional snowfall was now engulfed in a masking shadow.

The streetlamps lit up shortly after, and the shadows receded in every direction until they faded into figures that bore no resemblance to their original form.

After all, it seems like it'd turn into a long discussion.

Someone said that. Actually, it's possible that I may have said that.

The words ended there. It was clear that I wanted to continue, but no one objected to my silence. So, with a smile and nod of assent, the matter was put to rest.

I actually really wanted to grit my teeth and ask, *are we going to run away, even now?*

More than anyone, I really wanted to ask this to myself.

Even if there was a little bit more time, there was not a glimmer of hope to be seen.

However, I know that a definite answer will bring us to a conclusion. That's why that answer should be spoken.

If one doesn't say it, then no one will understand, but even if it was said, there's no guarantee that it would be understood.

Thus, that answer should be spoken, even though I know that decision will bring about regrets.

It's all because I don't want something genuine that is only cold, cruel, and sad.

Chapter 1

Finally, the seasons change, and the snows melt.



I have long since gotten used to the winter cold.

Because I have never left my place of birth, or this street, this cold was something I've been acquainted with for a very long time. Thus, I didn't feel that there was anything special about winter in Chiba.

Whether it's the dry air, the prickling icy wind, or the chills creeping up my back from my feet, they weren't that particularly loathsome. Though, it was still annoying.

You could say that for things with which one becomes accustomed, they are seen as natural occurrences, and thus are widely accepted.

Anyway, whether it's hot or cold, it's a question of how much that has surpassed the current weather standards. In other words, you can't compare this cold against anything if you have never experienced winter in other places.

So, if you don't know what warmth is, then you would never know about other sources of warmth. For example, warmth is just like when you blow out white breaths of air to warm your frozen hands, or the soft sound of your coat and muffler rubbing against each other, or just like when a bunch of people sit on a bench and accidentally rub their knees against each other, or even the simple heat from the person sitting next to you.

I thought about why warmth obtained through touch was so scary as I stretched myself. By the way, the people sitting next to me were Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. The two of them were sitting a fist apart.

At night, in this park that was just next to the sea, there was no one else but the three of us. If I looked up, I could see the two condo buildings where Yukinoshita was staying.

This park was a small walk away from the shopping district in front of the station, and if you took the main road, you would immediately arrive at the street filled with condominiums. Although it was by the sea, because of the presence of various majestic trees, and the trees planted to firm the sand, the sea breeze was not that chilly.

Even so, the reason why we all could feel the winter air so strongly was because of the lack of people, and the gradually accumulating snow.

The day was still the 14th of February.

People call this day Valentine's Day — or the day of dried sardines. Today was the day that my sister, Komachi, was going to be taking the entrance exam for my school.

At the same time, it was the day where we headed towards the aquarium together.

The snow that had fallen since morning had not accumulated much, but its presence could clearly be seen on the trees and grass. Let me tell you, snow can absorb noise.

Although I didn't think that such a thin layer of snow could possibly reduce noise by any discernable amount, it seemed like none of us were making any noise — just staring off silently into the night.

For a fleeting moment, the moonlight snow and streetlamps illuminated us. Thanks to that, our figures lit up brightly in contrast to the dark night. I remembered that in the past, the lamps emitted a pale fluorescent light. If that was still the case now, I am pretty sure that light would make us all feel colder.

The orange color that reflected off the snow did however give off a warm vibe. Still, the snow would disappear after the slightest touch. That warm, transient light tells me that the sparkling snow that fell into the ocean in the setting sun was not a hallucination.

Snow had indeed fallen, and the day that we had spent together was real as well. The snow was proof of it, yet, with a subtle temperature difference, or with the slight passing of time, it will disappear.

If you touch it, it disappears, and if you play with it, it will crumble and break. However, even if nothing was done to it, it will still disappear one day.

If the weather remains cold like this, is it possible that it would stay there forever...? I keep thinking about these meaningless "ifs." With a shiver, I tossed those wild thoughts aside. The answer to that was found long ago when I made that snowman back when I was a kid.

I shook my head, and left the bench. From the corner of my eyes, I spotted a half red half blue vending machine.

Just as I was about to head over, I turned my head and asked, "Want to drink something?"

Hearing my question, they looked at each other for a brief moment, but just as quickly, they nodded their heads. I nodded my head to show that I understood.

I walked to the vending machine and took out some spare change from my wallet.

Like always, I chose coffee. Then, I chose two plastic packaged red teas as well. Squatting down, I quietly slipped them into my coat's pocket.

As I was taking out the drinks one by one, the last one that reached my hand was a little scalding yet had an unusual chill to it. If I were to keep holding it, I would definitely be scalded. As I quickly tossed the can back and forth from one hand to another, I thought about the reason why it would even feel cold.

When my hand got used to the heat of the can, my question was answered.

The warmth that could be felt by one's body could be represented in numbers. Without ascribing to them any sort of meaning, they are only numbers.

However, I do know of warmth that was more than that. The difference between warmth and warm temperature was not just in their words. I had felt it through actual experience as well. Despite that, I didn't feel that I had noticed anything worth praising since I had only just realized that.

When comparing the warmth that I could obtain through coffee with a 100 yen coin, I felt that the warmth given off from body temperature that I received in that swift instant when our knees touched was a lot warmer.

While ignoring the heat in my hand, I continued to walk towards the bench. As I walked, I reminisced about the warmth in my chest that had remained to this day.

I had an inkling that, most likely, it was no longer possible for me to feel this warmth again. Hence, I wanted to let time freeze in this instant, yet I found myself continuously marching on.

The seat that I had been sitting in when I walked off was still empty when I returned. Since I now understood that warmth, I couldn't bring myself to sit down.

What, then, is the correct distance to be? Up until now, I have not found an answer to this question.

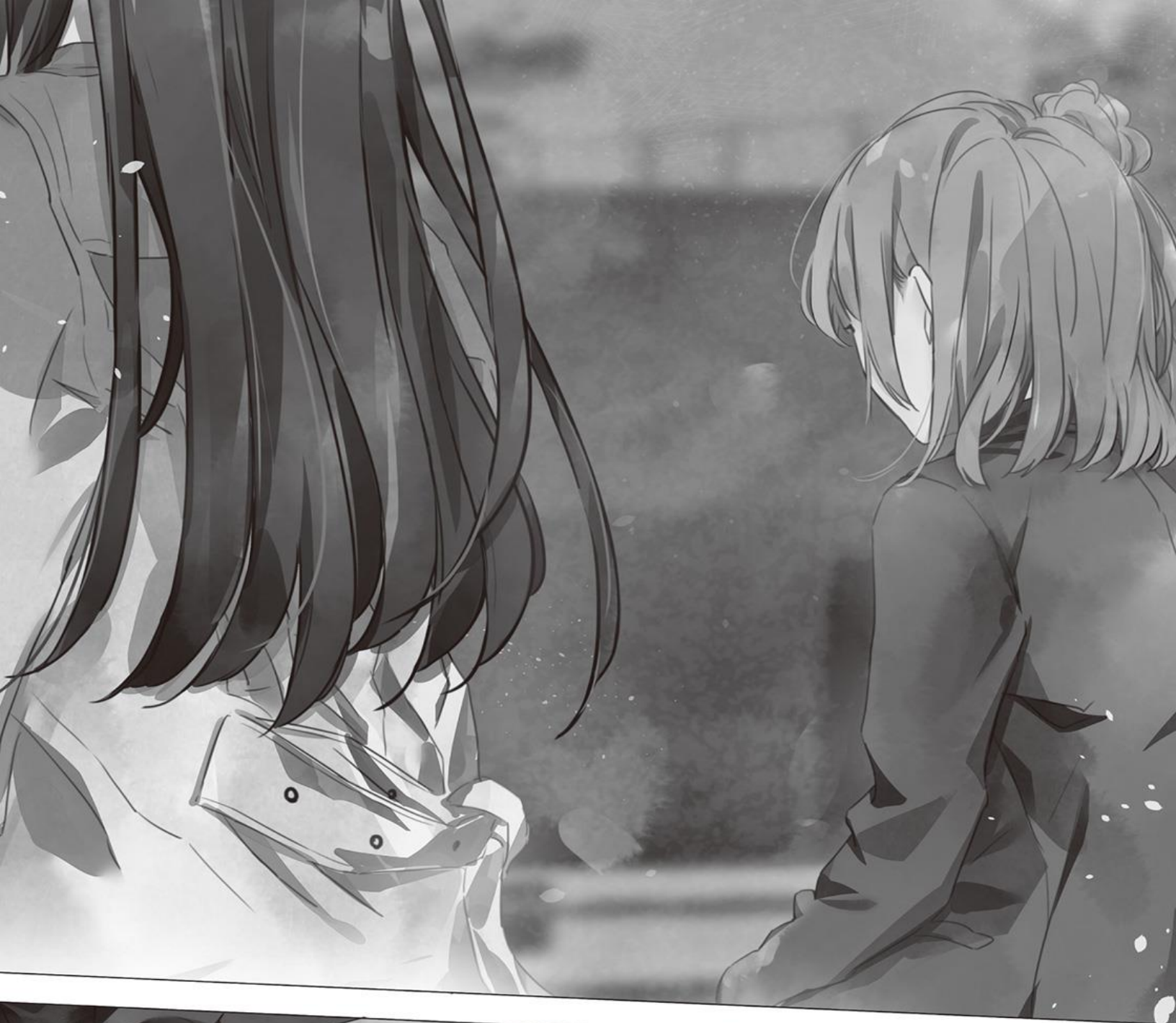
So I thought, "It should be fine up till here. I would probably be allowed to take a step further," as I continued to walk slowly towards them.

Just like how this entire year had played out, I gradually approached them, testing my limits as to whether I can move a bit closer, and at the same time, continuously recalculated the sense of distance between us.

I made bold steps forward while not knowing anything, yet carefully treaded whenever I noticed something. However, when I realized that I didn't understand anything, my legs couldn't take another step forward.

Just one more step. Even half a step would be good.

But, at this distance, I stopped.



The streetlamps illuminated the bench like a spotlight. Shadows snaked off into countless directions, gradually fading off into the distance.

I gazed mindlessly at those shadows as I took out the two cans of red tea and silently passed it to them.

They both seemed a little troubled, but thanked me anyway. They reached out for the tea, and I carefully handed it over so as to not touch their fingertips, then put my hands back in my pockets.

In that moment, there was a clear, crisp crinkling noise.

I could feel something smooth in my pockets, and, upon inspection, I noticed that it was the packet of cookies that I had just received.

The amount of cookies had neither increased nor decreased. Well, even if I were to repeatedly smash them, it would not increase either.

Likewise, happiness would not increase so simply. Be it Peter, Chita, or Carrousel,* they have all mentioned this.

(*Refers to Shinnosuke Ikehata, Kiyoko Suizenji and Maki Carrousel, no idea how they are related to the sentence.)

Yet, despite it clearly not increasing, the fact that it could so easily decrease or be lost was a horrible characteristic of it.

Worried that they might've been smashed, or mashed into some weird shape, I took them out of my pocket. Luckily, the pink wrapper had protected it by acting as a cushion.

Heaving a sigh of relief, I had originally intended to put it back into my pocket, but then I heard someone exhale beside me.

Looking at the source of the noise, I noticed Yukinoshita looking at the cookies.

"Those are really beautiful..."

She seemed to be looking at the cookies with much yearning as she said that. Those words that had suddenly slipped from her mouth made Yuigahama very surprised. However, she quickly leaned forward and replied, "Ah, yup! The bag and masute, I took a really long time to find them."

"Huh? Masute? Is that some greeting in India?"

Yukinoshita pressed her fingers against her temple and said, "The greeting is *namasute*, and she's talking about the masking tape."

"It's a surprise you know so much pointless information about greetings despite not really doing many greetings of your own."

"Are you stupid? With the proper greeting, the atmosphere will quickly turn into that of friendly conversation. The set phrases for greetings are a must to know."

With that said, Yukinoshita looked tired and gave a bitter laugh.

“Well, if it’s you, a greeting would probably count as a conversation too.”

“Ah, true. That’s why I try to avoid greeting people.”

“Hikki, are you really that bad at making small talk!?”

Well, I can’t help it if my name’s “Hikki.” How true it is that a person’s name determines their behavior. Come to think of it, I had actually gotten used to Yuigahama calling me Hikki... If it was the past, I would have totally ignored the person calling me by such an embarrassing name... Maybe I would’ve even looked away blushing and objecting to that name calling in a small voice. Yeah, right, as if I have any memories of that sort. I had simply given up and accepted her way of addressing me from the very beginning.

Masute, the abbreviation for masking tape, huh? Alright, I’ve remembered it, but I still don’t really know what kind of tape it is or how it is used. Come to think of it, Miss Yukinoshita, you seem to have quite a good grasp of youth’s terminology. What a surprise. I shifted my gaze to her while I was thinking of this.

As though understanding my intentions, she smiled gently.

“Masking tape. It is originally used for the sole purpose of sealing things. However, it has recently been used for decorations and design purposes.”

“Yup! There are many cute ones too, it’s very mainstream! It’s commonly used for packaging or on notepads.”

As I listened to Yuigahama’s explanation, I took another look at the bag. I see, it really is quite exquisite.

The bag had been tied with just the right amount of golden string. Even the little dog paw prints on the bag made it look pretty cute. Altogether, it was a beautiful design.

I continued to look at it. Yuigahama, who seemed uneasy, started to shift restlessly about. Her eyes kept darting about as well.

“Well, about the taste... I don’t have much confidence, but I did my best.”

With that, she looked at me with a determined look. Her serious eyes made it clear she was not joking. I gently caressed the bag of cookies.

Without a trace of sarcasm, I replied, “...Yes, I am pretty sure of that.”

This was something she had made with the best of her efforts. Although I didn’t know the taste because I hadn’t tasted it yet, this was something she had expended her best efforts on despite not being good at cooking. Thus, I know very well that she had indeed put her heart and soul into it.

Hence, to the best of my abilities, I will tell her my feelings honestly, without any sort of deception or beautifying it. However, she seemed to know what I wanted to tell her.

“Right? Hikki, didn’t you say that before? Something about ‘as long as one tries their best,’ or something like that.”

Yuigahama laughed and puffed out her chest. She wagged her finger proudly as she did that.

“...You still remember that?”

It was a little surprising. She had a surprisingly good memory. Well, of course, I remembered it as well.

What I said back then wasn’t a lie. I really did feel that way from the bottom of my heart, but it did make me a little embarrassed to have people tell me about what I had said in the past. I am one of those people who feels like dying each time I think about what I’d said in the past.

However, it wasn’t only me who seemed embarrassed.

“Well, that... instead of saying that I remember it, it’s more like I couldn’t possibly forget it. See, at the very beginning I was a little taken aback by those words, and so...”

With yet another embarrassed laugh, she stretched her body slightly as though she was feeling uneasy. Hey, if you keep doing that, I will become uneasy too! I ended up joining her and laughing as well. When our eyes met, Yuigahama swiftly averted her gaze.

“Well, Hikki’s always saying stuff like that. I have already gotten used to it.”

Then, as though she was telling a joke, Yukinoshita laughed and added on, “Yes, he really betrays people’s expectations.”

Yuigahama nodded her head vigorously in agreement to Yukinoshita’s words.

“Yup yup.”

Meh, I wished that they would keep those thoughts to themselves. I stared at Yukinoshita for a brief moment as I thought that, expressing my disapproval.

“Regarding that, I don’t think I am the only one. Aren’t you the same too, Nanameshita-san?”

“What is up with that barbaric name-calling...?”

Yukinoshita raised her eyebrows in displeasure and stared at me with a sidelong glance. In contrast, Yuigahama’s eyebrows were lowered and seemed troubled.

“Ah, right, that animal therapy at that time...”

“Well, that included, I am not exactly sure whether or not she was above or below my expectations.”

I scratched my cheeks gently, and nodded my head in agreement to the slightly embarrassed Yuigahama. At that time, our relationship was not that good, hence we didn’t say anything. However, now I would definitely ask, “what is that person doing?” Maybe Yuigahama thought the same way as well, for she was also nodding her head like she was thinking of something.

“Well, how do I put it? I thought that she seemed really smart, but...”

Whoops, here comes the disagreement. However, she had already said “but,” so what comes after must be something refuting the first.

What Yuigahama intended to say was probably, “she just wanted to play with the kitten.”

Anyway, not saying it out loud is also a form of kindness. If I were to relentlessly question her, she would surely counter me with a long rebuttal. Hence, I pushed the words I wanted to say back into my chest.

However, Yuigahama seemed unable to hide it. Indeed, looking at her chest... of course she can't hide it.

“Well, Yukinoshita does have her moments.”

Although Yuigahama said that to try and smooth the conversation over, she was met with Yukinoshita's icy gaze.

“Don't you mean yourself?”

“No, nothing like that. When we were playing big two, I was properly using my brain.”

Yuigahama began her rebuttal amidst hesitation as she thought about past events. Her words once again brought up memories of that time when we were playing that dark game.

“Really? I thought that you were just lucky back then.”

“W-Why should it matter? Luck is also a measure of one's true ability. It was my birthday on that day too, so having good luck was to be expected. Good things happened on that day too and I was quite happy.”

Yuigahama, who had started off talking in high spirits, hung her head and lowered her voice as she went on. Please don't say stuff that you will feel embarrassed about half-way through. When I thought about the present on that day, I wanted to die of embarrassment. Unconsciously, I lowered my head as well.

All of a sudden, Yukinoshita started to mumble to herself, “So you were lucky because it was your birthday...”

“Does it matter?! We won, and that's good enough.”

Yukinoshita tilted her head as she voiced her opinion. Meanwhile, Yuigahama seemed somewhat displeased and unhappy. Looking at them, I couldn't help but laugh.

It was just as Yuigahama said, no matter the process, it was enough as long as we won.

This sort of positivity from her had always been the thing that saved me. Yukinoshita as well.

Yukinoshita understood this too and smiled, then she brushed her shoulder-length hair and nodded her head in satisfaction.

“Well... winning is a good thing after all.”

“Here we go again, that ‘I hate losing’ attitude.”

Without thinking, and with a bitter laugh, these words escaped my mouth. As soon as I said it, I was met with a stare from the wide eyed Yukinoshita.

“You sound like you enjoy losing.”

“Not really... I try my best to win every time.”

Although that was what I said, the two of them didn’t seem to be listening seriously. In fact, Yuigahama sighed, as though agreeing with Yukinoshita.

“Just like that time during tennis and judo...”

“Now that you remind me, I do think it was a waste of effort on your part.”

Yukinoshita seemed to have suddenly grown tired, or she was just out of words as she just sighed. Being seen in such a light, I was a little unhappy. Thus, I made the effort to correct them.

“There was no such thing. My bones didn’t break,* it was just that my waist hurt during judo that time.”

(*Hachiman misunderstanding Yukinoshita. Waste of effort = 骨折り損, and bone breaking = 骨折り)

Hearing my reply, Yukinoshita suddenly became angry.

“It was just a figure of speech. What do you mean by your waist hurt? Anyway, did you go to see a doctor? Waist pains may have long term effects. It could have negative effects in the future.”

“What’s with that surprising amount of concern?! I-I too am very concerned as well.”

Looking at Yukinoshita who had suddenly began asking about my waist, Yuigahama felt surprised, to the point where she interjected to show that she cared. Although I am very grateful for your concerns, it would be better if you had voiced them out when I was actually injured... Well, since they are now showing me their concern, I guess I should update them as well.

“I did go, although it was just to an osteopathic clinic, but I did manage to get a formal excuse from gym class.”

Looking at my smug look, Yuigahama said somewhat halfheartedly, “You did what?! To think I was still worried for you!”

No, I am pretty sure you weren’t *that* worried back then... Probably from noticing my reproachful glance, Yuigahama quickly added, “But, those sort of idiotic activities were fun, the ones where everyone is involved.”

“...Really?”

I did agree with her on the idiotic part, but I was a little skeptical about it being fun because everyone was involved. Yuigahama puffed her chest and replied, “Yes, with Yumiko, Hina, Hayato-kun, Sai-chan, and Komachi-chan... It was fun playing with all of them. Like that time during summer break.”

Yuigahama was now gazing off into the distance. Yukinoshita nodded her head at those words.

“Rinkan School, right? Putting the issue of whether it was fun or not aside, it was indeed very lively... You haven’t forgotten her, have you?”

I did a mental headcount of all those who went to Chiba village and started to remember.

“There was still Hiratsuka-sensei... Well, she’s the teacher, so it would be hard to say we were all playing together.”

“...But, I do think that she had fun.”

It wasn’t as though I didn’t understand Yukinoshita’s feelings, who was now frowning. Ah, well, Hiratsuka-sensei always seemed to be quite happy... Tobe was there too. Screw that guy. It’s Tobe anyway. Tobe, I still remember your request very clearly, so please go rest in peace. Tobe probably heard from Hayama about all those strange things that I did. It would be great if I was the only one who remembered that.

During that summer break, there were a great many things that left behind deep impressions.

That bitterness accumulated like sediments, lurking about within my heart.

I was unable to just ignore that person called Tsurumi Rumi, because she looked exactly like someone I know. Even though the concept of “everyone” was vague, there was a strong pressure to be in sync with everyone else. It was this pressure that nearly crushed her, or maybe I just felt that she shouldn’t be pressured.

The outcome of that couldn’t be termed as good.

However, she still held out her hand despite knowing everything was fake, and I still held the faintest of hope, a prayer-like wish for her. This was yet another thing that I hope only I would remember.

But, regardless of how one thinks about an event, memories were something shared amongst those who had gone through the same experience.

Hence, she would probably talk about something that she wished only she would remember as well.

Raising her head to the sky, Yuigahama said, “The fireworks were fun too.”

Looking at her, I couldn’t help but raise my head. There were no giant rings of light or golden showers of rain, just a pitch black night sky.

“Fireworks, huh?”

"You still remember?"

"Well, although I didn't do anything, that day was something I remember."

There was a slight teasing in Yuigahama's voice. Thus, I shrugged my shoulders and replied in a self-depreciating manner.

Having been through those events, we were able to treasure our shared memories.

What followed were bouts of light laughter that turned into the shallow noises of soft breathing. Our breaths gradually faded away until everything was devoured by silence.

Yukinoshita, as though trying to break the silence, inhaled deeply.

"That summer break was about 40 days long, yet I only have memories of those few days..."

"That's probably how summer break is like. Before you know it, it's already over... Come to think of it, we became really busy after that."

"A lot of things happened in the coming semester after that."

"Ah... Well, I blame the committee president for that..."

Suddenly, I started thinking about that *one person*, and my tone quickly grew unpleasant.

Yuigahama chewed her lips, looking a little troubled.

"Hmm... No comment."

Ah! Yuigahama-san, you are too kind! Normally, at this moment, one would be like a judge who would jump up with much vigor and issue the death penalty! As I thought that, I noticed Yukinoshita shrugging her shoulders. It seems like Yukinoshita wants to voice her own opinion. Nice! Yukinoshita-san is not such a kind person!

"It wasn't just the fault of Sagami alone."

"Ah, her name, you said it..."

"...You're one to speak, I doubt you were going to say her name at all."

Yukinoshita placed her fingers to her temple and looked at me with a frown. I could only nod my head in an expression of "yes, yes." I know, my bad.

She lightly coughed before continuing, "At that time, it became the way it was because of various reasons."

Her way of saying it felt somewhat abstract, as well as a little broad. Then again, how else could one put it? Even so, we were still able to understand what she meant.

There were factors like thoughtlessly pushing one's expectations, or becoming stubborn to make it feel like it is not a good thing to simply push one's request onto others, or maybe something like thinking that one has thought everything through, thus selfishly assuming people's thoughts in their stead.

However, in the process of going through these things over and over again, and learning a little more about each other, I now feel like we have acquired some new answers.

These answers were probably a little different for each of us, but they were probably the same in the end.

“Anyway, the schedule was way too packed.”

Yuigahama and I nodded our heads.

“True. Our school field trip was immediately after that camp.”

“We were rather busy during that trip as well.”

I didn’t dive further into the topic. However, Yuigahama and Yukinoshita did.

“I always thought that we didn’t really have the spare time to go and do some leisurely sightseeing. I think we only went to Kiyomizudera? Then there was that place with the many bird’s nests? We didn’t get to eat many local specialties as well... But the trip to the movie village (Toei Uzumasa Eigamura) was really fun! The haunted house too!”

“...I thought the haunted house would’ve been a most bothersome place.”

In contrast to Yuigahama’s excitement, Yukinoshita appeared unmoved. Although we did indeed have different schedules because of us being in different classes, I didn’t think that Yukinoshita would ever enter a haunted house even if we were together. To be honest, I didn’t think she was good at that sort of thing! No, I’m absolutely not good with them, you know?

“I think we more or less visited all the sightseeing spots. There was Ryuanji, Fushimi Inari, Toufukuji, Kitano Tenmangu, and so on... There were other places that I visited as well. As for food, we did have tofu and udon sukiyaki hotpot back at the inn. I also managed to go to a café that I had always wanted to go.”

Yukinoshita seemed to be quite happy. ...Ah ah. It was just as I thought, that café that you went to in that morning was due to your own interest. Well, the shop’s appearance was very fashionable, and the food was delicious too, so I don’t really have many complaints...

As she was reminiscing, Yukinoshita seemed to have thought of something and added, “As well as the ramen...”

“Ramen?”

Yuigahama tilted her head, looking doubtful. Yukinoshita shut up immediately and I quickly said something to redirect the conversation.

“Ah, there are a lot of famous shops in Kyoto. Places like Kitashirakawa and Ichijiyoji are super popular. If I had more spare time, I would love to go to those places too... Not to mention Takayasu, Tentenyu...”

“Huh? What?”

“Ah, nothing. Those were just the names of ramen shops that I wanted to visit, don’t mind me.”

“O-oh, okay...”

Now that I’ve finally gotten rid of Yuigahama’s suspicions, I decided to continue on with the previous conversational topic.

“Well, after that was a huge bother as well. Shortly after we freed ourselves from Sagami’s issues, we had to deal with Isshiki’s.”

“Aha... The student council election was really something.”

Yuigahama let out a bitter laugh and Yukinoshita’s shoulders drooped a little. Watching her, I exhaled exaggeratedly.

“After the elections, that Christmas event happened. Really, those were the hellish days of ‘logical,’ ‘magical,’ and ‘preach it...’”

With a chuckle, Yukinoshita bit back with a vicious remark, “It was really hard understanding what *that person* was talking about... Then again, what you said just now was hard to comprehend as well.”

Her back, which was hunched over a little while ago, was now upright. Yuigahama nudged her.

“Well, we did get to go to Disneyland for free, and we had great fun there too! We also bought many Pan-san goods!”

“...Well, I suppose that’s true. It wasn’t all that bad I guess.”

Yuigahama let out a laugh and looked towards Yukinoshita. Yukinoshita looked away. It was heart-warming to see those two like this.

Indeed, it wasn’t all that bad.

I thought that the things that we did during those days were meaningful. Had we done our best to help and look out for Isshiki? Maybe not. Did we help Tsurumi Rumi end up at the right place? I don’t know. Needless to say, I had no idea why she said those things as well.

But, at the very least, it was not all in vain.

It was because of all these thoughts that we were able to live out this year in peace. I suppose it wasn’t only me, but also the two of them who were also holding on to this warmth.

This was probably why Yuigahama could talk about all these past year memories with such calm.

“I always felt that things really did go by in a flash. Is it because so many things happened in the past year...?”

“I thought that it was really busy after the New Year as well... Especially since that’s when Komachi really began to prepare for her entry exams.”

After the start of the new school term, it became very busy due to all the rumors and all the other things happening. The time where it was truly peaceful was during the brief period of the New Year. Hence, all I could really remember was that period during the start of the New Year. Whenever I thought about it, I couldn't help but worry about the outcome of Komachi's exam.

My worries over the outcome of the examination results were probably plastered all over my face. Yukinoshita offered me some encouraging words.

"It would be great if the shrine visit at the start of the New Year brought her some good luck."

"Uh? Oh, right. Yeah, I hope so..."

I decided to change the mood of the conversation and added, "Well, I guess it wouldn't do anything even if I kept worrying about it."

Yuigahama nodded her head at those words, "Yes. How about this? Let's celebrate her hard work when it all ends!"

"Ah, sure. Let's host a huge party to celebrate her passing of the examinations."

"...Okay."

"Let's!"

Although what I said hinges on the presumption that Komachi indeed passes, the two of them did nothing to point this out. They stood there smiling. I am really grateful for their words, and, so, I smiled as well.

Then, Yuigahama's mood grew a little solemn.

"But, it will be our turn soon, huh?"

"That's right. At about this time next year, we would be taking our college entrance exams. Then after that..."

As Yukinoshita rambled on, her gaze lowered gradually as well. We knew what she wanted to say even without her continuing.

After the exams, it would be our graduation.

"This year went by really fast..."

As I said that, the reality of it all hit me a little harder than I expected. One year. The length of this period of time was nothing more than the summation of all the events that we had talked about previously. I think the two of them understood that as well.

"This year is the fastest year that I had experienced so far."

Yukinoshita sighed heavily, and Yuigahama immediately replied.

"I think so too! How should I put it? You know, it's like what the adults like to say? How the feeling of time gets shorter as one grows older."

“Ah, well, it’s because of this, and that we were so constantly busy... The requests just kept coming in one by one, but I blame all that on Hiratsuka-sensei.”

“When you put it that way, you make it sound like she’s the New Year Monster.”

Yukinoshita laughed bitterly, to which Yuigahama and I expressed similar expressions too.

Really, everything had happened because of things that one person had said.

All of it was really not much of a big deal. They were probably things that she just happened to decide to push onto us.

Now, all of it was coming to an end.

Ultimately, I was always unable to reach a decisive conclusion, just some vague ones. Even so, I want to remove that vagueness; even if I'll make a mistake, or even if I'll lose something, I've decided that I shall find my own answer, our answer.

There would be no end to it if we keep thinking about the past; I could say as many things as you wanted me to about the past year.

They would all be joyous and happy, things that would make one keep on laughing.

If one needed to say something, it would be said, but if one didn't, it would be hidden.

Yet, there wouldn't be a single breath for what one truly wanted to say.

Arbitrarily, intentionally not saying those things would also be proof that one cares about those things.

Regarding this point, I think the three of us knew this all too well.

Hence, our conversation came to a halt.

The time that we had spent together was barely a year. In this one year, there were many memories. Whether we remembered them, or forgot about them, or even pretend to forget, it doesn't matter.

All this talk about the past will have to end one day.

If we were to talk about the past until reaching the present, then conversation coming to a halt was unavoidable.

Hence, what should follow should be about the future.

Perhaps because we all knew this that all three of us made sighing noises, but no one spoke.

The future was something that cannot be seen, cannot be known, cannot be understood, and cannot be gone against.

There was no way of seeing it, or any way of knowing it. Despite it clearly being incomprehensible, there was no retreat once one proceeded on.

In this moment of silence came the sound of a muffler rubbing against the clothes.

“The snow seems to have stopped.”

Yuigahama raised her head to look at the misty night sky as she said that to no one in particular.

Yukinoshita did not reply to her, she merely gave off a smile that was like the moonlight piercing through the misty, cloudy night sky. She nodded, and then raised her head as well.

I guess she was looking at the moon too.

It has always been like this thus far.

At the same place, looking at the same things, spending time together.

However, I fear that the answers we would give would not be the same. It is our answers that we each absolutely believe to be unchanging.

Hence, so as not to say it, we kept talking about other things like the weather, or the very sweet coffee, or maybe some other trivial memory.

“It was snowing on the day I was born. So, Yukino... this name is really simple?”

In this silent moment, Yukinoshita suddenly talked about her name. Watching her self-mocking smile, Yuigahama replied in a gentle voice, “...But, it’s a very beautiful and wonderful name.”

Although I knew that Yuigahama wasn’t looking for any sort of approval for her comment, I nodded my head naturally.

“...It is a good name.”

Hearing my reply, Yuigahama blinked in surprise. Yukinoshita also opened her eyes wide in surprise. What’s with those reactions you two? It will only make me feel embarrassed. Thus, I averted my gaze.

I raised the coffee to my mouth and took a small sip so as to disguise the awkwardness.

I really did think that it was a good name, so it would be really strange for me now to go and deny what I had just said. There was also nothing else for me to do.

The name Yukino suits her pretty well.

Beautiful and transient, along with a ring of loneliness to it.

What was unusual was that I didn’t associate her name with any form of coldness or frostiness.

“...Thank you.”

Hearing her soft words of thanks, I turned my gaze back and noticed Yukinoshita had lowered her head. Her hands were clasped tightly together on her skirt. Her smooth black hair was like a curtain that covered her face. Yet, one could see her blushing from a small gap in her hair. Yuigahama had probably noticed this bit as well. Her lips twitched a little and laughed softly.

She probably heard her laughter because she coughed and raised her head before correcting her posture.

“This was decided by my mother. Then again, this is just something that I had heard from my sister...”

Her voice sounded calm from the very beginning, but it felt as though her voice had gradually faded off into the night sky at the end. Looking up, and then looking down once more, she let out a somewhat bitter laugh.

At that instant, Yuigahama and I were at a loss for words.

Should we just follow up on her words with anything we could think of? For example, “My name Hachiman is even more simplistic. My parents clearly were frustrated for a long time when trying to think of Komachi’s name, but my name was decided almost instantly.” Maybe something as random as that?

Or maybe I should let Yuigahama do the talking. She will probably handle it better than me?

However, both Yuigahama and I chose silence.

We used the sound of our breathing in exchange for words to reply her.

Yukinoshita’s mother, as well as Haruno-san...

Regarding the relationship between them, we didn’t know much. Well, I didn’t know much about Yuigahama’s family relationship as well. Rather, I have absolutely zero idea. Furthermore, the two of them probably didn’t know much about my family either.

What I didn’t know was something even more basic.

I didn’t understand her or the both of them. Because I didn’t understand, I didn’t know the correct way to reply them.

If it was a case of me utterly not knowing anything at all, I suppose this was excusable.

It can't be helped if someone says something strange because they don't know the other person. It's natural to expect one or two misunderstandings because they don't know them, and it's natural to not be concerned because they don't know them. If troublesome matters were to come about, then just pretending that one doesn't know would be good enough. After all, we really don't.

Yet, the understanding between us has reached a point where we can no longer ignore it. We can no longer pretend not to know. It would be completely shameless to pretend to ignore it at this point in time.

In the end, I still did not know of the appropriate way to approach this relationship amongst the three of us. On the surface, all I did was go about exchanging banter with them, expressing agreement with their views, conversing about our own stories, and voicing some not-so-strongly worded suggestions. I could more or less do all of that. These were probably model answers. Anyone would have normally done these to the extreme as well.

But, it was because we wanted to reject all of these things that we were here on this day.

Unknowingly, my hands had begun gripping the coffee can with much more force. However, the metallic can wouldn't be crushed flat just from that force alone. Thus, my fingertips started to shake, and sound of water could be heard.

The fact that these soft noises could be heard was proof of just how quiet we are right now.

Slowly, I raised the can to my mouth and shook it slightly to gauge how much was left. I made a decision. After drinking, I will speak.

If it's something I decided upon, I have to do it. It has always been this way. Although I might be dragged along, swallowed up, or pulled along, in the end, I must be the one to make the final judgment.

This is my personality. Having strong judgement was not something worthy of praising. Rather, it was just second nature to me. There's only yourself, hence you yourself must do everything. That's what it means to be a loner. You could call me a utility player, but I definitely cannot do everything. In fact, there are many things that I am not good at. If you really wanted to know something that I was good at, that would be deceiving myself through persuading myself to give up.

However, now was not the time to be deceiving myself.

I have to be honest with myself.

Frankly, I felt that I've always avoided thinking about the future.

Running away didn't seem quite an accurate description. But it was the closest word to it.

You could also call it avoiding.

But it was definitely not escaping.

Even right now, I felt a little annoyed.

In the end, I was not hoping for any sort of answer, solution, or conclusion. I was only hoping for things to somehow disappear. I was only waiting for all these difficult problems to somehow vanish into thin air.

I fear that the three of us were probably subconsciously wishing for all of this to just disappear. That was what I had thought for my own convenience. Although it was quite arrogant of me to make this conjecture about their feelings, I felt that this wasn't far from the truth.

After all, the time that we had spent together was like a slumber, or you could call it one that seemed to slowly drag out. Yet, it was also a time that had its moments of ups and downs.

However, I know that this would not come true.

Yuigahama Yui had already tossed her question out into the open.

Yukinoshita Yukino was already preparing to answer it.

If so, what should Hikigaya Hachiman do?

The past me would surely have laughed at this dull situation. The future me would surely not allow this conclusion that couldn't even be called an answer. However, the present me does not know the correct thing to do, but felt that this situation wasn't right in any case.

If so, then what I should do would be to try my best to right this wrong. What I should be doing is to speak.

After drinking the last bit of coffee that had already gone cold, I began to speak.

At the very beginning, nothing but the sound of me panting came out. Then, the sound of slight moaning as I thought about what words to use. Finally, I said something somewhat decent.

"...Yukinoshita, can I hear it? The things that you want to say."

I wonder what I was trying to tell her through those words.

The parts that I wanted to hear about were not conveyed clearly at all.

However, this should be more than enough for the both of them. The sentence had no head or tail, as well as no trivial bits. However, it is still possible for it to be the start of something. At the very least, this sentence conveyed the idea of the want for a conversation as well as advancing this relationship, which was now at a standstill.

Yuigahama inhaled lightly and stared at me. Her gaze seemed to be asking about my resolve.

However, Yukinoshita's body seemed to stiffen and she lowered her head.

"...Do you really want to continue listening?"

Her hesitation could be felt through her reserved tone. The glance that she sneaked at both me and Yuigahama seemed a little weak, and hesitant.

Yukinoshita's question. No, I wasn't even sure if it was a question. What she said was not directed at me. To settle this, I coughed a little, and looked at her for confirmation. Yukinoshita looked somewhat troubled, dropped her eyebrows, and became silent.

Like me, she was probably searching for the right words.

As though wanting to give Yukinoshita some support, Yuigahama sat by her side and touched her hand.

"I have always felt that... it is right to keep on waiting. Up till now, even if it's a little by little, you have told us a lot of things."

Yuigahama leaned her head on Yukinoshita's shoulders. I wondered what color those eyes were that were hidden behind her closed eyelids. I did not know. However, the stiffness of Yukinoshita's body slowly began to relax, just like ice gradually thawing. This was either due to Yuigahama behaving like a puppy wanting treats, or because of the warmth that she gave her. Her fists that

had been tightly clenched and placed on her skirt began to loosen up as well. She reached out to hold Yuigahama's hand.

She held both hands as though trying to confirm each other's warmth, and then slowly began to speak.

"Yuigahama-san, you once asked me what I wanted to do, right...? However, I myself still don't quite understand yet."

I always thought that Yukinoshita's voice was somewhat entrancing, like a small kid who doesn't know how to speak. I probably had a similar expression too, like that of a small kid who didn't know where to go as I listened to her quietly.

Yuigahama looked down, seemingly hurt.

Yukinoshita noticed this as well, and as though being mindful of her, or maybe encouraging her, tried her best to be cheerful and smiled gently.

"But you know, in the past, I too had things I want to do... things that I *wanted* to do."

"...Things that you wanted to do?"

Yuigahama was probably somewhat surprised, for she repeated Yukinoshita's words. Yukinoshita nodded her head proudly.

"My father's work."

"Ah... but that's..."

Now that she mentioned it, I remembered as well. I had once heard that Yukinoshita's father was a member of the diet, and, in the past, had ran a construction company. These were something that Haruno-san had once told me. As I tried to think of something to say as I recalled these vague recollections, Yukinoshita spoke first.

"Yes. But, because my sister exists... that decision is not mine. It's always been my mother's."

Yukinoshita's voice had grown a little cold. She was looking into the distance, as though staring at something there. Watching her like this, we didn't say anything at all.

There was a saying that when one talks about their memories, they would look off into the distance. Yukinoshita was now looking up at the sky, and I followed her gaze.

I didn't know if it was the wind from the sky, but the clouds that were soft like candy floss kept on drifting, and the clouds that were bathed in moonlight kept on changing their shapes.

It seems like I didn't have to worry about this weather. The clouds that would make snow fall seemed to have already drifted far away. Maybe we could even see a few stars.

The light from the stars came from sources that were tens of light years away from us. The light was vague in the sense that, even in this instant, we had no way of knowing whether it really

existed right now. Because of this, it looked all the more beautiful. Something unobtainable, or maybe something that was about to disappear, is the most beautiful.

Because I knew this, I was unable to extend both my hands. Surely, in the instant that I touch it, its color would fade and rot. I knew too, that for a person like me, that was not something that I could grasp a hold of.

Yukinoshita, who was describing her wishes in the past tense, as well as Yuigahama who was listening to her, was surely aware of all this.

“From the very beginning, my mother had decided everything. She has my sister tied down, yet she gives me complete freedom. Hence, that is why I keep following in my sister’s footsteps, because I do not know how to act...”

From her murmurs, I could feel a tinge of nostalgia and regret. Looking at her side profile, her gaze looked somewhat lonely and sorrowful.

“...Even until now, I still don’t know anything... Really, it’s just like what my sister says.”

As she softly spoke those words, her focus had shifted from afar to looking at her feet. Motionlessly, as if trying to ascertain if she was unable to move, she gazed at the tips of her beautiful boots.

All of these quiet murmurs from her rendered us unable to speak.

Yukinoshita had probably noticed this painful silence, so she raised her head and smiled.

“This is the first time someone has listened to me about this.”

I was attracted to that smile. I let out a somewhat relieved sigh from my dry lips, and replied.

“Have you not told anyone else?”

“I think that I might’ve talked about this a little to my parents...”

She seemed to be thinking hard as she said that. That was probably something that she did a very long time ago. Yukinoshita continued to try her best to recall, but in the end, she shook her head.

“However, they’ve probably never taken me seriously with regards to these matters. They did tell me that I shouldn’t worry about all this however... After all, the heir to the family’s business has probably already been decided to be my sister.”

“Have you said anything to Haruno-san?”

“...I think not.”

Hearing Yuigahama’s question, Yukinoshita put her hands to her chin and thought about it for a while and gave a bitter laugh.

“That person, has *that* sort of personality after all.”

“Ah, true...”

Be it from her sister, Yukinoshita, or from her childhood friend, Hayama, as long as the topic is about something like the future, or love, or dreams, or hopes, Yukinoshita Haruno was not someone especially suited for conversations of this sort.

If it was someone that she had utterly no relation with, perhaps she could put on a sincere face and give a suggestion that fitted the current cultural norm. She would not only be able to give a good reply, but also let the other party agree with her view and make the other party very satisfied. For that person, doing this should be easy for her.

However, if the party was someone close to her, she would take an entirely different approach. She would not only laugh and tease you, but would even continue to treat you as her toy and bully you despite the problem being long resolved. This was something that Hayama Hayato had said some time ago.

He and she had probably experienced something like that as well. Hence, this was why Yukinoshita had never once talked to Haruno-san about it.

Well, I wouldn't purposely discuss my future plans with my own family. I don't know if this was lucky or unlucky, but up until this point in time, I have never faced any major decisions that far exceeded my area of discretion.

But, it was because of this that when I heard about problems relating to family, I didn't feel any sense of being able to relate to her. If my family was running some sort of business as well, then perhaps I could sympathize with her a little. Unfortunately, my family was the typical salaryman family, so her conversational topic seemed a little far from what I could relate to.

This was probably true for Yuigahama as well. She had lowered her head, looking as though she didn't quite understand.

Yukinoshita didn't seem to mind our reactions and continued on.

"However, I should tell her properly. Even if it's possible, it won't come true in the end... But, it's probably because I am afraid of that answer that will set everything in stone that I am always unable to seek confirmation."

Yukinoshita's voice carried with it a tone of nostalgia. Perhaps this was regret on her part. No matter what, the past was something that cannot be changed.

Yet, her eyes were still looking head on.

Right in front of her, were Yuigahama and I.

"That's why, I should start seeking my confirmation from there... I want to decide it by my own volition, not because of anyone's words, but because I want to think it through properly, to understand... to want to give up."

Her light breathing sounds were accompanied by a silent smile.

Through her calm voice, Yukinoshita had said it. That she wanted to give up.

In Yukinoshita's heart, she had probably been very sure about it. Yet, that line of thought had never received any sort of confirmation, hence it kept going through her mind.

If one doesn't open the box, one would never know. Before that time comes, before the moment of observation, the result is not yet determined. Be that as it may be, but if the observer had always been understanding and accepting of that, then the end result matters not.

At the very end, the result will not change.

"I only have one request... I want to ask you to see it through to the very end. That much will be fine."

Yukinoshita took a hold of her scarf and closed her eyes. She didn't look like she was trying to tolerate the surrounding cold, but rather trying to correct the position of her scarf. Haltingly, but with much care, she had said each and every word just now as though she was swearing an oath in front of a god.

"That is... Yukinon's answer?"

Yuigahama said that in between bouts of hesitation. Although this appeared to be a question, Yuigahama had lowered her gaze, and was not looking at Yukinoshita. However, Yukinoshita continued looking directly at Yuigahama.

"I suppose, but it could be wrong..."

Yukinoshita put up a seemingly wry smile, and softly held Yuigahama's hand. Yuigahama raised her head.

"In that case..."

When she was in the middle of her sentence, her eyes met with Yukinoshita's, and it was at this time that her words got cut along with the contents of what she wanted to say.

I also lost my voice, maybe because I forgot to breathe.

Yukinoshita's smile was beautiful.

Her long, seemingly-combed black hair flowed gently, revealing her white, slender face; her crystal-clear eyes captured me.

Her gaze was without tremor or doubt as she fixated on us. I thought there wasn't even one lie behind those deep, blue colored eyes that seemed to suck me in.

"However, I... I still want to prove to everyone the things that I am capable of doing. I feel that this is the only way things can really begin."

Not only did her words contain no hesitation, even her tightly gripping hands, her fixated gaze, and her upright posture contained no hints of doubt.

"Truly... begin..."

Yuigahama's face seemed fired up as she said that softly. Yukinoshita nodded her head in confirmation.

"Yes. I need to go back to my parent's house and properly discuss it."

"...So this is your answer."

The way I said it made it sound like it wasn't a question at all. This sort of sentence that didn't address anyone was no different from a monologue. However, this softly spoken sentence reached Yukinoshita's ears. She placed her fists lightly on her knees and gently spoke.

"I never gave up on it no matter how much time has passed... That's why I believe these are my true feelings... I think there's no mistaking it."

As she finished, Yukinoshita sent me a fleeting glance.

I could understand parts of what she said, but those were probably the parts that I could relate to.

If something were to not change no matter how much time passes, and if it didn't fade away no matter how long it was cast aside, then I would have no reluctance in calling that genuine. This was different from those false feelings that would vanish after waiting for so long that you end up parting from them.

If something does not disappear despite turning your face away, or averting your eyes from it, or pretending not to see it, or being forgotten, then it shouldn't be wrong to call it a genuine desire.

If this was the end that she wished for, then I have nothing to say.

There was only one point that I was fussing over.

Yukinoshita should proceed on her own, and decide on her own.

She shouldn't decide based on someone else's intentions, expectations, peer pressure, situation, or mood.

Even if she were to destroy something, that wouldn't be a good reason to rob her of her value or dignity.

What I wish for aren't her words that are meant to answer someone's request, but ones that come from her heart.

"Wouldn't it be fine? Giving it a try."

I said that as I lightly nodded my head in response to her gaze that seemed somewhat lacking in self-confidence. Hearing my words, Yukinoshita touched her chest, somewhat relieved.

"Okay... I'll do it because I think that also counts as an answer."

Yuigahama, who was silently looking at Yukinoshita's face from the side, quickly removed her gaze and stared down at her feet.

Then, as though making sure of something, Yukinoshita slowly nodded her head a few times.

“Thank you.”

Yukinoshita quietly muttered that as she drooped her head. I couldn’t tell what kind of expression she wore because of this. I’m afraid that I would likely never know. Even if I were to see it, I surely would have immediately forgotten it.

That’s because Yukinoshita’s expression was extremely bright when she raised her face once more.

Without giving me or Yuigahama a chance to say anything else, she quickly stood up.

“We should be on our way. It’s beginning to get cold.”

Saying that, Yukinoshita took a step forward. Her destination was probably the exit of this park, and the room where she resided in. Yukinoshita looked over towards us who had still not moved.

Her flowing black hair, fluttering skirt, swaying muffler, and upright figure were so beautiful that I hesitated to approach her.

But, I had already promised that I would see it through to the end.

Thus, I began to walk in her direction.

I hoped to myself that at least her words held some truth, even if I ended up regretting it.